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ABSTRACT

Speech communication educators should measure the effectiveness of communication abilities in the resolution of prevailing social problems. Purdue University department chairmen were asked to draft "mission statements" in a 1971-72 project. The project afforded the Department of Communication staff an opportunity to redefine their goals and to assess their activities. Two dominant social exigencies were observed as challenges to communication talents: the increasing complexity of society and growing social upheaval. In response, speech educators should lead students toward communicative reapproachement, should apply rhetorical insight into interpersonal conflicts, and should discover communicative means of bridging the gaps in society. Specifically, speech communication scholars can teach the art of influencing public policy through effective speech and can demonstrate to individuals how to increase their rhetorical individuality and ability in order to enjoy more fully the mass communication experiences in their daily lives. (DS)

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The Mission of Speech Communication: Social Perspectives

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Preface

As I understand it, my job in connection with this action caucus is to paint, in broad strokes, my view of the "mission" of speech communication sans context--to lay out a kind of over-arching, structural view of the field. Thus, my intent is to offer a few "contextual touchstones" with which most speech communication scholars can identify. From what I'm told, your jobs as participants in a caucus dealing with the unique sub-mission of speech communication in urban environments is to detail the specific responsibilities you have as associates of metropolitan speech communication departments.

Two important parameters of this paper must be kept in mind by the reader: (1) I propose to address myself to the problems and potentialities of speech communication--that is, the manifold ways in which more effective utilization of human talk can help to improve the efficiency and stability of the social fabric; (2) in many cases, the "job descriptions" that I offer for speech communication teachers and researchers have not been our traditional concerns nor are we the only discipline that can and should address ourselves to such exigencies--speech communication is, in my opinion, a necessary although not a sufficient condition for the amelioration of the social problems treated herein. These distinctions are my own and they can (and perhaps should) be broadened by those who take a more cosmic view of the general field of communication.

Still, I'm not sure that I have done my job well. In trying to provide you with a broad perspective of speech communication, I find myself making grand (probably grandiose)statements. I find myself harkening back to traditional (probably trite) perspectives. In outlining (probably just re-outlining) the unique mission of speech communication, I have likely succeeded in making still another mountain out of an innocent molehill. In a sense, outlining the general mission of speech communication is like trying to say something intelligent about love--ya got a feelin' for it, but ya can't help but make horrendously ericsegalian statements like "Speech communication is not having to say you're sorry."

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Of all the ugly words to beset higher education of late, the most vexing seems to be "accountability." Suddenly, it would seem, college administrators, state legislators, trustees, alumni, and last but not least, the increasingly burdened taxpayer are beginning to make hostile, indecently pragmatic assaults on the last vestige of the good and the right--the groves of academe. They require, of all things, for educators to render an accounting, to demonstrate how their pedagogical product "stacks up" against more tangible community services--namely parking garages and land fills. Educators have been quick to respond to such invitation-shrouded attacks and their rhetoric-of-paranoia is a thing of beauty to behold: "education is not a market-place commodity," "you can't treat learning in dollars and cents terms," and "who asked you anyhow?"

CS 500 591

The issue of accountability is a testy one indeed; a presentation of the pro and con arguments would make an interesting addition to a study of community dramaturgy. No matter how the controversy surrounding accountability is eventually resolved, however, the most novel aspect of the issue is that suddenly taxpapers and state legislators are asking sociological questions of educational institutions: In what way, by what means, and to what end does education fit into the social fabric? Political pressures, a current love affairs with cost accounting procedures, and a post-Kent State skepticism of higher education in general have all collaborated to force the primal query: What good are you? No longer, it seems, will educators be able to rely solely on the inherent verities and values of book-learning. We are, increasingly, being asked to develop new arguments for our continued, expensive existence.

While all of this may seem far afield from the chief concerns of this paper, the "mission" of speech communication in higher education, a closer inspection of the accountability question will reveal that all who would call themselves contemporary educators, especially those of us in the humanities and social sciences, will be required to address ourselves to issues similar to those alluded to above. Thus, in the next few pages, I propose to explore a very few of the sociological issues confronting modern man and to suggest how the academic field of speech communication seems uniquely qualified to assist in the resolution of certain social exigencies while at the same time fulfilling a number of important human needs. Throughout our discussion, it should be remembered that there are many compelling "academic" arguments which help to sustain speech communication's raison d'etre. While these will not be treated here, they must not be ignored, since in the long run such lines of argument may serve us in better stead than will those I propose to sketch out here. But the sociological gauntlet has been dropped and it is to such issues that I now turn.

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During the 1971-72 academic year, the president and board of trustees of Purdue University charged all academic departments to devise "mission statements" which, when gathered, would help to define collectively the role that Purdue plays in the affairs of the state of Indiana. Knowing that the long-range recipients of such documents would be rather hard-nosed state legislators, the group conspiring to compose the Department of Communication's mission statement was robbed of the "to talk is to be human; to talk effectively is to be effectively human" series of arguments. Being the canny audience analysts they are, the committee proceeded to ask themselves what social expectations a state legislator might have of a department which purports to affect the lives of its students by introducing them to the vagaries of human talk. By being forced to ask themselves such knotty questions, a curious thing happened. The committee members, and the department as a whole, began to take a much grander view of the teaching of speech communication and, almost self-reflexively, began to believe the results of their deliberations, deliberations which suggested that professionals in speech communication have a special opportunity to make oftentimes oblique but nevertheless vital contributions to the populace at large.

The report was completed, submitted and quite likely secreted away in some far away place in the administration building. Still, for a time at least, the "mission making" experience had been a salutary one. For, in our discussions we had helped to redefine for ourselves where our unique talents lie and what special

goals seemed to be beckoning us. On the assumption that the activities of the Purdue department is but a small scale version of what the field of speech communication in general is about, it might prove interesting to look at a few of the conclusions I reached while participating in Purdue's mission-making.

Not surprisingly, a first re-determination is that speech communication is an applied discipline. It should conduct research and build theory only insofar as such enterprises increase our abilities as scholars and teachers to use our knowledge for the benefit of interacting man. Our analyses of communicative behavior are not solely ends in themselves; rather, such knowledge serves to point up how men can cease to exacerbate individual differences, and instead, reach some form of human accord via talk.

Equally predictable is a second, historically sanctioned conclusion: speech communication is a pragmatic discipline. The lessons we teach, the hypotheses we derive, the interactions we analyze inevitably force us to muck about in the world of Everyday Man. Our teaching and research in the past have been, and probably should continue to be, activities that deal with man where he is, and from that vantage point, suggest to him where he might be. As members of an academic discipline, we seek to help our students make real, seeable differences in the bump-and-grind of everyday communicative interaction.

Operating on these two basic assumptions--that speech communication professionals seek to apply their understandings and do so for pragmatic reasons--we are then in a position to speculate about the specific problems that the trained, sensitive communicator may help to resolve. While each of us probably can think of a number of obstacles that speech communication professionals can help to overcome, there appear to be two dominant social exigencies that invite the plying of our communicative wares. To wit:

1. Increasing Complexity of Society---For some time, almost without our noticing it, seemingly each and every aspect of society has multiplied, divided, sub-divided, and remultiplied. The extended family is in its death throes. Large corporations spawn smaller businesses which, in turn amalgamate with still other industrial concerns. Tax forms become more intricate year by year. The Sunday trip to the zoo must be undertaken in the face of a number of countervailing forces: freeways, traffic patterns, beltways, etc. And out of this labyrinthian creation, man must fashion his day-to-day social existence.

While speech communication scholars can hardly hope to eliminate the causes of such brobdingnagian problems, we surely can and on occasion already have addressed ourselves to the inevitable manifestations of societal complexity: dehumanization and problems relating to the clarity of information diffusion.

Our teaching and research in interpersonal communication can and should focus on satisfactory rhetorical methods of efficiently and humanely mediating our and others' existences. By understanding the norms, roles, strategies, and communicative obligations placed upon us by what Vance Packard alludes to as our nomadic existence, we can, in some fashion at least, make the most out of the human resources which must become our stock in trade as we do battle with the forces that threaten to dehumanize us. That we must continue to learn how to utilize such resources seems unquestionable as we look at the apparent linear relationship between the complexity of man's social life and his refusal to interact. Dehumanization,

the process by which we fail to particularize our communications for specific others, (thus treating them as an abstraction of their class--as nondistinctive "things") is surely a problem of some magnitude in today's society, a society that appears to distort and deify Robert Frost's "good fences make good neighbors."

But it we are to understand one another in a complicated society, we first must be apprised of each other's values, ideas, and mores. Work in organizational and mass communication seems to be predicated on the assumption that to know is, to some extent, to relate. Hence, specialists in organizational communication are becoming increasingly interested in the communication problems and potentialities presented to an individual as he works within a complex organization, whether the organizational setting be industrial, governmental, or educational. On a larger scale, professionals in mass communication seek to satisfy a complex society's need to know by utilizing the considerable capabilities of the mass media. For, despite the political overtones of Spiro Agnew's attacks on the media, he has raised an interesting issue: to what extent can a modern, complicated society continue to survive in the face of the suppression of information?

Our brothers in the "communication sciences" should also be concerned with the other side of the information coin. While the lack of carefully articulated mass information threatens to segment us, so too does the "information explosion," a frankenstein-like creature that modern man has created and which now perversely comes back to stalk him. Thus it is becoming increasingly clear that the information and communication theorists among us must develop novel and efficient methods of "storing, indexing and packaging" information so that all of us have a fighting chance of intelligently understanding and coping with our very involved existences.

2. Growing Social Upheaval---It would seem that after thousands of years of inhabiting this planet, man would now be able to deal with his fellows without resorting to coercion and violence. While we in speech communication know that the symbolic tools necessary for the successful completion of such a task have long since been developed, we should also be quick to suggest that such instruments are not employed with sufficient effectiveness. Although it would be foolish to cling to the messianic hope that effective communication can successfully solve all social problems, it does seem clear that racial turbulence and other forms of social, political, and religious ostracism result in large part from a communicative default.

Those of us in speech communication can make only a modest contribution to the amelioration of such large scale interpersonal rifts, problems created in large part by increased specialization. Although we cannot hope to offset widespread social upheaval, we can affect some of the constituents of society through our teaching and writing. For example, our basic courses in speech communication have long been populated by a veritable potpourri of students, a clientele which is, in a sense, a microcosm of society at large (or at least of the university at large). Hence we as teachers have long been in possession of the tools necessary to channel dialogue effectively so that persons of diverse interests and experiences can reach accord. Even though individual differences form the substratum of interpersonal contacts, and hence make social upheaval an ever-present possibility, we in speech communication can at least introduce our students to the strategies and possibilities of communicative rapproachment.

On a larger front, our concerns with free speech, the responsibility of the mass media, the nature of agitative communication, and the sources of rhetorical conflict have, or at least should have, focused students of speech communication upon peaceful, symbolic methods of resolving widespread interpersonal stress. Our approach to solving such problems need not be polyanna-like, however. For example there is a growing body of literature that suggests that some sort of "conflict" is necessary in any form of sustained interpersonal relationship and that all relationships must be able to deal "creatively" with stress before they can mature and thrive. Thus, speech communication scholars must learn more about the "power forces" in human relationships and apply rhetorical insight to the satisfactory handling of interpersonal conflict.

While the elimination of social upheaval is hardly the academic prerogative of one segment of the academic community, we in speech communication do hold an historical claim to a piece of the action. After all, it is probably not accidental that our curricular and extra-curricular activities in discussion and debate--uniquely human and uniquely social methods of short-stopping interpersonal alienation--have always received the attention of speech communication scholars.

More recently, speech communication teachers and researchers have explored the relatively virgin terrains of inter- and intra-cultural communication. While our knowledge in these areas is currently anemic, there is every reason to suspect that future research will equip us to deal better with the problems presented by inter-group contacts. We in speech communication really have little other choice than to make forays into such areas, for as long as all men continue to be affected by widely divergent forms of learning and acculturation, there will be a persistent need to discover practical, communicative means of bridging the gaps of age, sex, race, economy, culture and sub-culture.

As if the foregoing problems weren't enough to occupy the attention of an academic discipline, there are at least two other social needs that should be imbedded in the consciences of speech communication scholars:

1. To Change Public Policy---From a personal vantage point, I do not see the collective mission of scholars in our field to be that of directly changing the shape and direction of society. Again, I see ours as an oblique function, that of equipping others to bring about social alterations. And it is quite difficult to imagine persons better equipped philosophically to teach others the art of influencing than those of us in speech communication. Indeed, almost every historical sketch that has been made of our field suggests again and again that we have always given the means and ends of rhetoric and persuasion preeminent attention.

Now, while our field has become more catholic in its concerns, especially as of late, we do have considerable rhetorical expertise to offer our students and the community at large. Our teaching and research in speech behavior, persuasion, rhetorical theory and historical and contemporary public address all bespeak a concern for and involvement in the ways by which men can peacefully effect social and political change. An ever-growing number of courses in the technical and artistic aspects of mass communication are also means by which our students' abilities to influence can be increased.

When we remind ourselves of the increasing complexity and divisiveness of society and its attendant charms of lethargy and power-mongering, our responsibility as teachers and researchers of persuasion become pronounced. In an era in which the oppressed, the disadvantaged, and the isolated find it increasingly necessary to effect changes in a system controlled in large part by the powerful and the affluent, we must apply our very best critical, philosophical, and scientific knowledge to making noticeable dents in the edifice of public opinion. No movement be it religious, social, or political, can help to thrive or even survive unless due consideration is given to symbolic methods of implementing the goals and strategies of that movement. While we in the academic field of speech communication must never forget that our historical, critical, field, and experimental studies of persuasion are valuable as methods of generating and preserving knowledge, we should not forsake the social due placed upon us by the applied, pragmatic, disseminating nature of our discipline.

2. To Deal with Everyday Living--With the advent of television, of mass entertainment, of variegated forms of social life, of increased leisure time, and even of growing interest in the nature of social man himself, the day-to-day communicative demands placed upon all of us have increased in both frequency and kind. That speech communication and the other social sciences must be prepared to explain and to make more profitable such interactions seems to be a growing imperative. Thus, our understandings of the aesthetic dimensions of radio, television, and film dovetail with a society concerned with how such forces entertain and influence them. Similarly, our sometimes sisters, oral-interpretation and theatre, provide rich experiences and insights for those who would explore still other of our proclivities to use human speech both expressively and instrumentally. Such areas of study provide unique and vital insights into our most usual forms of relaxation and ad hoc education.

While the traditional concerns of our discipline mainly have centered on the public manifestations of communicative behavior, many in our field are now beginning to turn their attention to the vicissitudes of talk faced by persons in their more "private" lives. Thus, speech communication scholars are beginning to make significant inroads into the social, psychological, and physiological aspects of speech behavior in an attempt to discover the unique potentialities and limitations of interacting man. Never has there been a greater need for serious investigations to be made of pathological reticence, of the acquisition of communicative behavior, or of the problems encountered by those who are without the usual physical and intellectual resources necessary to make intelligible noises. No person, be he rich or poor, black or white, young or old deserves to be deprived of making the most out of his rhetorical individuality or his ability to dialogue with others for reasons frivolous or fundamental.

Cognizant of the paucity of knowledge surrounding our abilities to listen efficiently or sensitively and to encode and decode the nonverbal behaviors surrounding our spoken acts, scholars in our field are challenged to add still more to our knowledge of communication. Happily, still other teachers and researchers in our field are now beginning to prove equally crucial aspects of man's everyday interpersonal behaviors, namely his participation in familial, educational, and social settings. While real understanding of such areas is still lacking, we are surely making steady progress as we week to satisfy our sociological mandate--to increase

every person's ability to be all that his spoken discourse will allow him to be.

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Perhaps it must be the lot of those who would presume to discuss the social mission of speech communication to appear both fatuous and impractical. Still, the times demand that we make such attempts at sociological placement, that we outline how we are able to make important and practical contributions to the societies and institutions that sustain us as teachers and researchers. Quite obviously, the mission of speech communication quickly gets lost amidst a mosaic of sub-missions; equally apparent is that speech communication professionals must be prepared to adapt themselves to the special constraints placed upon them by the contexts in which they operate. Surely, for example, those who teach in urban colleges and universities have unique responsibilities and must be prepared to deal with contingencies not faced by those in other educational environments. Yet, whenever the mission of speech communication in general is discussed, there inevitably seems to be an attempt to relate that mission to the social forces we seek to deal with. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the description of the field distributed recently by the Speech Communication Association:

> The exponential increase in communication confronts man with himself in all his forms and textures, yielding the hope of new solidarity among peoples--in the future. But communication technology presently is the means of contagious uneasiness, aggravating anxieties and hostilities, often distorting the fragile structure of the human dialogue. John Dewey's dictum contains new urgency: "Improvement of the methods and means of debate, discussion, and persuasion is the need of a democratic society." Joining the rigors of scientific experiment with the perspectives of humanistic criticism in laboratory, library and field, the study of speech communication must validate that knowledge which can strengthen the self-to-other relations of man.[1]

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[1] K. Brooks, C. Arnold, R. Brubaker and J. Douglas, The Study of Speech Communication (distributed by the Speech Communication Association, 1972), p. 10. My italics.